

Lemuel Sanford “Sandy” Bowers was many things to many writers. Virtually all we know about Sandy Bowers, believed to be the first Comstock millionaire, was written after his death at Crown Point Ravine in Gold Hill on April 21, 1868.

Editor Myron Angel in his *History of Nevada* (1881) characterized Bowers as “an ignorant, easy-going frontiersman . . .” An anecdote--probably apocryphal--in the pioneer history makes the Gold Canyon miner appear to be a lucky, good-hearted buffoon who just happened to strike it rich in 1859 and frittered away his fortune with his wife and business partner “Eilley”.

In editor Hubert Howe Bancroft’s *History of Nevada, 1540-1888* (1890), we find that Bowers was an “illiterate Irishman” who married Scottish-born Allison Orrum Cowan in 1858. Actually, the couple was married on August 9, 1859, shortly after the major discoveries at Gold Hill where they had adjoining claims. “The Bowers became famous alike for their riches and their ignorance of their uses of wealth,” according to Bancroft’s work, and reference is made to a trip the couple took to Europe where “they remained three years abroad.”



The voyage to and from Europe, wrote Grant H. Smith in *The History of the Comstock Lode, 1850-1920* (1943), lasted only eleven months. Smith, citing Eilley’s testimony in an 1865 court case, noted that the Bowers left San Francisco on the steamer *Golden Gate* on May 1, 1862, returning to Nevada Territory in April 1863. He referred to the couple as “. . . simple, unlettered folk . . .”

Swift Paine, in his work *Eilley Orrum Queen of the Comstock* (1929), wrote of Sandy Bowers in 1859 that he “. . . had come from Missouri several years before as a teamster”, was “[s]pare, boyish, unlettered, [and] given to roistering . . .” Paine later admitted to taking great liberties with the facts and inventing conversations and events for dramatic effect.

In a modest biography of Eilley Bowers entitled *The Mistress of the Mansion* (1950), author Alice B. Addenbrooke described “Sandy” as “enterprising . . . although uneducated.”

Perhaps the most sympathetic account of Lemuel Bowers is found in *An Editor on the Comstock Lode* (1936) by journalist Wells Drury. Drury interviewed Dr. Simeon Bishop, his own father-in-law and a close friend of the Bowers. “Two better people than Sandy Bowers and his wife never lived, exclaimed Dr. Bishop . . . They were plain folks, both of them, though she was somewhat more pretentious than he’.” Dr. Bishop continued that “[h]e was a frontiersman; his ancestors had been pioneers of Kentucky. . . . He was a gentleman without trying, and without knowing why.”

Contrary to writers who exaggerated the cost of constructing the ostentatious Bowers Mansion in 1862-1863, Drury stated that the figure for the construction of the residence in Washoe Valley was actually \$300,000. Grant Smith argued that the Bowers Mansion “. . . cost far less than \$407,000 as claimed by several writers. Bower’s wealth has been a juicy morsel for sensational writers who knew little of the facts and cared less.”

Singling out Eilley and Sandy Bowers out as poor money managers in the midst of the Comstock’s first great depression in 1864-65 is not fair. Literally thousands of people on the Comstock, in San Francisco, and elsewhere suffered heavy losses in the stock market and in the resulting foreclosure and sale of mining properties. Barbara J. Jefferies in her study, *“Sandy” Bowers’ Widow The Biography of Allison “Eilley” Bowers* (1993), made no reference to Sandy being ignorant and unlettered when she noted how financially devastating the mining depression was to virtually everybody.



The meager primary documentation on Sandy Bowers and his life indicates that most writers relied more on folklore and fantasy than fact in writing his story. According to the 1860 U.S. Census for Gold Hill, Utah Territory, L. S. Bowers was 27 and a native of Illinois. His passport documents that he was born in Madison County, just northeast of St. Louis, Missouri, on February 24, 1833. A letter at the Nevada Historical Society in Reno dated October 11, [1862] and signed “Mr. L. S. Bowers” from Liverpool, England to John Oram, his brother-in-law, in Scotland was probably written by Eilley. However, Sandy’s last will and testament, subscribed by L. Sanford Bowers on April 15, 1867 and attested to by former California governor and Nevada Supreme Court Justice J. Neely Johnson,

includes Bowers’ signature. It can be inferred that Sandy had some rudimentary education and, in all fairness, was not ignorant.

No more fitting epitaph for Sandy Bowers can be found than a line from the obituary published in Virginia City’s *Territorial Enterprise*: “By his death the State has lost a good and useful citizen, and the working men of the country a true and sympathetic friend.” Hundreds attended his Masonic funeral and the body was transported to Washoe Valley. Today he is buried on a hillside behind Bowers Mansion near the graves of his daughter, Margaret Persia, and his wife, Eilley.

Guy Rocha, October 2003

Portrait of Samuel “Sandy” Bowers, n.d. Courtesy of Bucket of Blood Saloon, Virginia City, NV

Photograph: Bowers Mansion, ca 1870. Courtesy of Bowers Mansion Park, Washoe County Parks and Recreation Department.

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